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Jesus: Ancient Archetype, Sacrificial Son, Divine Messenger

Liz Hood¹

I do not believe in Jesus. At least not in the strictly Christian sense. It is probably best to begin there. It is all the other ways that Jesus was – a sacrificial son/sun of a virgin mother, a soteriological force for reunion between God and humanity, a personalized, life-giving face of the divine – that I believe in, or his kind of guy. In considering this question of Jesus, his divine lineage, his personhood, death and message, it was important to remain mindful of the context in which I write. Christianity today is estimated to have over two billion followers, representing about a third of the world's population (Oxtoby & Segal, 2012, p. 143). Jesus and those who spoke for and about him launched something mysterious and ringing into the *zeitgeist* that has not come out of fashion for two thousand years. That counts. But Jesus was not the first; there were other sons – and sons – and virgin mothers, other sacrificial deaths, other invitations into divine salvation out of which the Jesus we know today emerged. Who Jesus is to me has as much to do with where he came from as what has become of him. In this paper, I will introduce some of the ancient saviour gods that created a soteriological template to which Jesus was divinely attuned and discuss the repercussions and responses that have resulted from a two thousand year old *idée fixe* of Jesus the Christ as archetype, man, and messenger.

Let me speak to my social location before I begin. I was raised within the dominant Anglo-Christian culture of suburban southern Ontario to an upper middle class, non-religious, Euro-mongrel family (Scottish, English, German). Until the end of primary school, we said the Lord's Prayer every morning and in grade four Mrs. Foneri had us each take turns reading a passage from the big Bible on her desk for good measure. That was the alpha and the omega of my Christian education until my rather unlikely arrival at seminary three decades later. During my undergraduate degree, we were shown a documentary about the untold thousands of women killed during the Inquisition, burned at the stake for the crime of witchcraft (Starhawk, 1989, p. 20). Somehow, I found this alluring. Not the violence and misogyny, but the idea that there may have been an earlier time when the indigenous religious traditions of Old Europe were still alive, when women's role in society and "theology" (Starhawk, 1989, p. 25) played an essential role, and when spiritual traditions (or their dwindling remnants) were grounded in a partnership between the genders and with the land (Eisler, 1988, pp. 11-12). So, as I have placed myself at the feet of the Church fathers here in middle life and listened carefully to the arguments of the rabbis, I hear through the ears of my ancestors, colonized so long ago, that my ethnic, ancestral, and spiritual heritage is now considered 'New Age' (Eisler, 1988, p. 3; Ferlat, 2014, p. 212; Markale, 1999, p. 4; Oxtoby, 2012, p. 596; Starhawk, 1989, p. 16). I listen with depth and history, with myth and imagination. I do not intend to 'disprove' Jesus, nor diminish the gift of his healing force in the world. But I do aim to explore who Jesus is within the expansive embrace of the pre-Christian era, to examine why the person of Jesus has come to claim the hearts, minds, and souls of so many believers.

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The Archetypal Jesus

Jung (1989) introduced the concept of archetypes and their vast archival library, the collective unconscious, to the world. Jung was fascinated with Christ as a psychological model, asserting that Jesus contained a constellation of collective thought on “the primordial image of Anthropos” (Jung & Jaffe, 1989, p. 211). *Anthropos*, the Greek word for human, is translated in the New Testament to mean, ‘Son of man’ (Wikipedia, 2016). Jung attributed the rise of Anthropos in the collective unconscious to a syncretic fusing of Jewish ideas on the Messiah and the myth of Horus, the re-born son of Osiris from the Egyptian pantheon (Jung, 1989, p. 212; Walker, 1983, p. 415). While deeply contemplating Ignatious’ *Spiritual Exercises*, the crucified Christ appeared to Jung as a vision, made out of a greenish-gold metal. The green in the gold helped Jung realize that his conception of the Christ had been missing a vital living quality, or life spirit that enlivens the universe (Jung, 1989, pp. 210-211). Jung’s alchemical vision revealed to him that Jesus was “a union of spiritually alive and physically dead matter.” (Jung, 1989, p. 211). These archetypal ideas of Jesus the Anthropos, a messianic Son of Man, living, dead, and re-born, carrying the psychological essence of the spiritual, political and religious needs of his time are also reflected in his predecessors, the ancient Mediterranean saviour gods.

Due to the tremendous similarity between Jesus and his soteriological forerunners, some critical scholars consider Jesus as a composite character rather than a discreet historical figure (Walker, 1983, p. 464). Gods like Osiris from Egypt, the Roman Mithra, Phrygian Attis, Syrian Adonis or Tammuz, and Baal(im) from Canaan had many similar qualities, titles, lineage and traits tied to a life-death-rebirth cycle that enacted and supported agricultural fertility cycles (Rische, 2010, p. 8; Walker, 1983, p. 84). Adonis, Tammuz, and Attis were born of virgin Marys – Aphrodite-Maria (Myrrha), Ishtar-Mari (Mariamne), and Nana or Mari-Anna of the Caananites, respectively (Walker, 1983, p. 77, 462, 465). Adonis’ virgin mother Myrrha was also a human maiden, who gave birth to him in Bethlehem (Walker, 1983, p. 10). In pre-Christian Goddess cultures, it was common for the son/sun to have no father, only the Goddess as mother/lover; he is born of her, becomes her Bridegroom, begets himself, and is sacrificially cut down in the cycle of earthly renewal (Eisler, 1988, p. 103; Markale, 1999, p. 24; Starhawk, 1989, pp. 19, 111).

Each of these saviour gods bore Jesus’ titles before he took them up: Adonis and Tammuz were called Christos (‘Anointed’); Osiris and Tammuz were called the Good Shepherd; Mithra and Heracles were named Light of the World; Dionysus was the King of Kings, God of Gods; Vishnu and Mithra were considered the Messiah and called Son of Man; Mot-Aleyin was also the Lamb of God (Walker, 1983, p. 464). At the spring equinox, Jesus, Adonis and Attis were sacrificed, rising after the third day to assume their divinity, and were born again at the winter solstice, the Pagan festival of sun-/son-return associated with Goddess worship (Eisler, 1988, p. 102; Walker, 1983, p. 77, 465). Dionysus, Osiris and Adonis “were eaten in the form of bread” (Walker, 1983, p. 465). Historical analysis reveals evidence of Christianity’s syncretic origins; Christ’s Passion and his role as Bridegroom in his marriage to the cross explored in Augustinian writings may have their origins in pre-Christian ideas of sacred marriage; Jesus’ teachings and stories find parallel accounts in earlier sacred texts in Jewish and pre-Christian cultures; the role of the three Marys at the foot of the cross invoke echoes of the triple Goddess; Jesus’ life bears such similarity to earlier spiritual and religious traditions, some scholars believe that Jesus’ “story was not merely overlaid with myth; it was

mythic to the core.” (Walker, 1983, p. 470). Historicity of the human Jesus aside, in him constellated an archetype of established ideas of a son and saviour that appears to have brought the lineage of soteriological gods to a final resolution (Jung, 1989, p. 211; Rische, 2010, p. 19; Walker, 1983, 465).

Jesus the Man: The Problem of Subjectivity

In her doctoral thesis on the Mediterranean saviour gods, Rische (2010) argues that Jesus culminates and concludes the archetype through the power of human incarnation and divine resurrection. She compares the myth of Jesus’ predecessors, whose lives and rebirths may have been likewise mythical, with the ‘facts’ of Jesus’ real human life, death, and supernatural rebirth (Rische, 2010, p. 10). Historical criticism is unkind to most religions, Christianity notwithstanding. Yet, Rische’s conclusions of Jesus’ unique status hinges on establishing the veracity of the historical Jesus. This paper will not brave the murky deeps of Biblical authority and historicity, but it may be useful for context to mention that Biblical critics do note a complete absence of Jesus in any parallel documentation from his day; the Gospels are presumed to be written in the genre of mythical biography, not the more factual style of the Greco-Roman, and no earlier than 60 years after Jesus’ death when his contemporaries would be well into late life; the Gospels were subject to redaction and Canonical council oversight; and none of the writers of the Gospels or Acts had ever met Jesus “in the flesh” (Coogan, 2010, pp. 1743-44, 1791; Noll, 2012, pp. 23-24; Walker, 1983, p. 465) with the possible exception of Mark. Perhaps we could simply agree this ancient document is as likely to bear as much that is factually true as is untrue about Jesus, in the modern understanding of the word. From this, I propose that historical Jesus is as contingent upon belief and faith as his ‘mythical’ brothers.

Again, one cannot dismiss the audacious and powerful effect of an incarnated god on its believers. Without a doubt, it is Jesus’ claim to life and death as a man and resurrection as God that is the central doctrinal message in the Christian tradition (Coogan, 2010, pp. 1743). Yet, his humanity causes problems, many of which are solved by thirty years of missing (authorized) biographical data. Was he an angelic child? Did he ever have sex, or get married? Was he selfish, or sometimes cruel? We do not know. The Gospels aim to tell stories of a god-like man, yet in accounts like the Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30, New Revised Standard Edition), we see a miserly, insulting Jesus, shamed into sharing his powers with an inferior supplicant (Alonzo, 2011, pp. 122-123). We cannot make a full accounting about how Jesus’ human behaviour was received by his followers over the millennia, but one author notes the Church experienced some difficulty appealing to women in the Renaissance era, as “Any hero who speaks to his mother only twice, and on both occasions addresses her as ‘Woman,’ is a difficult figure for the sentimental biographers.” (Walker, 1983, p. 471). Of course, it seems clear that Jesus’ biographers were at pains to present him as a friend to women, certainly more than Paul/Pauline writers (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:3-13; 1 Cor. 14:33-35; Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Tim. 2:9-15, 5:6) or the early Canonical councils were comfortable in doing. This brings us to the central problematic in the current age: historical Jesus’ gender and apparent ethnicity. Is God really a man? Jesus, son of his ‘father’ God, was inarguably presented as a man. Given Christianity’s massive popularity, it always strikes me as remarkable that half the whole of Christendom over two millennia could claim no divine representation (the cult of Mary, notwithstanding). The silent majority’s contemporary, Wright (2008) suggests this total absence of female god imagery is bad for both men and

women, legitimizing the denial and denigration of women's physical and spiritual selves (p. 56). Writing from the Medieval period, Julian of Norwich found for herself an image of God that righted the obvious gender gap, proposing, "Our great Father, Almighty God, in his most wonderful deep love, by the prescient eternal council of the blessed Trinity, he wanted the second person to become our Mother, our brother, and out (*sic*) saviour...our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears for us joy and for endless life, blessed may he be." (Furlong, 1996, pp. 237-238). How Christian women privately managed this arrangement over the centuries is the topic of another paper, however history bears out that Julian was a rarity in her public views on the divine motherhood of Jesus.

And is Jesus a White man? Many contemporary writers have documented the development of a Euro-centric Christianity that justified the purposeful invasion, domination, forced migration, rape, torture, and enslavement of Indigenous people and People of Colour around the world under the triumphalist banner of a White Jesus (Cleveland, 2016; Dellinger, 2015; Mitchem, 2001; Williams, 2006). With less than forty percent of Christians living in Europe or North America in contemporary times, the denial of the divinity of melanin, in part, led to the arrival of Vatican II and Liberation theology (Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005, p. 212; Noll, 2012, p. 294; Oxtoby, 2012, p. 198). Modern theologians of colour have sought to understand how the person of Jesus can be accurately and convincingly represented within their own cultural traditions, leading Kaur-Mann (2004) to suggest that "each [culture's] image bears the interpreter's bias." (p.19). Elizondo (2011) expands on this idea, suggesting that "in seeking to write about Jesus of Galilee, each culture has in effect produced a self-image of its own ideal self." (p. 55). Engaging in this form of evolutionary Christology, feminist theologian Kyung, drawing from Asian women's experiences proposes an "image of Jesus as shaman and woman as an alternative to... patriarchal models." (Baker-Fletcher et al, 2004). Can the Son of Man now claim title to the Pagan Goddess of pre-history in the post-modern age? It makes my head swim. What is clear to me is that Jesus' humanity, contextualized for the ancient Mediterranean, strains at the seams of today. To my ears, these christologies sound like cries for a new saviour.

Jesus the Message: A Modern Predicament

Can Jesus be everything to every believer? Unlikely. But what about his message? While his humanity created a bridge by which his followers could access the infinite nature of God, it also encapsulated him into a finite package that made his message susceptible to distorting influences over the expanses of time. Whether Jesus was given and then taken by God, arrived out of the psyche of the collective unconscious, or was created by aspirational religious novelist-biographers, there is no question he arrived to save. But from what? For there to be a Jesus, there needs to be sin. On this point, I diverge with my Christian colleagues and take an approach that resembles Dellinger's (2015) explanation of "Traditional Native Religion's... [cultural] understanding of human beings' capacity to fall outside of creation's state of ideal harmony... [which] occurs through acts that feature a lack of reciprocity towards other persons or creation." (p. 124). Modern Pagan ethics are built on the foundational belief that all life is sacred, not just human life. Interdependency, interrelationships, self-responsibility and honour are our guiding principles (Starhawk, 1989, pp. 26-27). Perhaps the fundamental reason I cannot believe in Jesus in the Christian sense, is that I do not believe I need saving. My immortal soul is and has always been safely

woven into the fabric of Being. It can no more fall out of grace than matter or energy can be created or destroyed. It is. I have no need of Jesus in this way.

Jung, vexed about the theologians that hounded his explorations of Christian motifs in his writings, complained about their inability to cease evaluating every little utterance for eternal truths, proclaiming, “theologians do not understand the natural sciences, and, particularly, psychological thinking.” (Jung, 1989, 217). How fortunate to be a woman of my times, with a degree in environmental studies, education, and quite soon to hold one in theology and psychotherapy. I concur with Jung that this broad range of training brings me into intimate relationship with ideas from neuroscience, geopolitical influencers, attachment theory, and spiritual caregiving in such a way that I fear I must reject sin as an obsolete theological concept. There are bad choices, systems, genes, nurturing environments, outcomes, and there is profound unfairness in the world, but I have not yet encountered any heinous act that was improved by the assertion that we are fundamentally broken. For what purpose are psychotherapy, ecology, chaplaincy, or even living if I am irreparably broken? My inner skeptic suggests that if I believe myself to be broken, I am definitely going to need a saviour. Which came first, God or sin?

Jesus’ teachings are widely known – his attention to the marginal people of his time, his message of love towards the Other; his attempts to right the outdated religious practice of his day. In this paper, I have examined Jesus’ message primarily as his role as saviour for humanity, the path through which Christians are invited to enter the Kingdom of God. That idea intrigues me. I wonder if Jesus’ message might have been presented a little heavy-handedly, a little concretely, in the Gospels, since we know they were not written in the same sophisticated style of the Greco-Roman biographies directed at the elites of his day (Coogan, 2012, p. 1743). If that were the case, and Jesus had something important to share with us about the transcendent nature of our relationship to God, how might it have been presented for a more sophisticated audience?

Wilbur (2001), Transpersonal Therapy’s primary theorist, writes about a *perennial philosophy*, a golden thread that runs through all the world’s major religions hinting at a common truth of *unity consciousness*, “a loving embrace with the universe as a whole.” (p. 3). Wilbur suggests that the explosion of psychotherapeutic modalities today represents the natural response to humanity’s wrestling with the maturation and growth stages of human consciousness evolution, or the movement of intentional awareness towards God. On a basic level, we learn about Freud’s ideas of persona and shadow, working to integrate our self-hidden aspects into a single healthy ego (to love our Self); at the ego level we work to repair the split between the ego and the body to become a whole organism (to love our Whole Self); at the organism level we begin toying with transpersonal ideas of interbeing with our environments and others (to love others because they are our Self); and finally, in the deep realms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and esoteric forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, we learn to achieve enlightenment or oneness with God/Being/Atman (to Love) (Wilbur, 2001, p. 14). For example, Wilbur stresses that Jesus’ transpersonal teaching did not mean, “‘Love your neighbour *as you love yourself*,’ but ‘Love your neighbour *as your Self*’... to love others not because they love us, affirm us, reflect us, or secure us in our illusions, but because they *are us*.” (Wilbur, 2001, p. 119).

For Wilbur, this means that each form of therapy can be directed toward work at the level where a client is operating, psycho-spiritually. I wonder now, what if Jesus’ chroniclers or Canonic councils purposely chose to present Jesus’ message at the persona or ego level to

appeal to a wider audience? What if the heretical Gnostics were simply operating at one of the deeper levels? Did they think of the Tower of Babel and edit sagaciously? Jung also wrote about double-edged sword of consciousness, humanity's gift from God that allows us "to gain an insight into [our] Creator. [We] have even been given the power to annihilate Creation in its essential aspect, that is, [our] consciousness of the world. [Which brings us] to a problem of the future that has already become threateningly close... the idea of the creature that surpasses its creator by a small but decisive factor." (Jung, 1989, p. 220). Is humanity mature enough for enlightenment? Can we shed the old idea of a father-god or a son-god and simply step into our shared divinity?

Conclusion

Jesus was an archetype for a divine masculine force that is the Life-bringer, the Light-bringer, whose body as bread nourishes the world, whose body as sacrifice saved the world, whose resurrected body became God. He and his forebrothers like Tammuz, Adonis, Osiris and Attis played this sacred role, though Jesus, it seems, has held the post since. Jesus may have been a man, or myth, or a mythicized man, and his biographers' attempts to turn him into a God that could be touched, could weep, could heal a sick child, could be radically known, could have never imagined that his skin colour, ethnicity, or gender would have been a source of so much devastation, destruction, and desolation endorsed in his name. Jesus' message was vulnerable to his advocates who, in their desire to make a Jesus that could be known in their time, may have lost the message, may have misunderstood 'love your neighbour as yourself' to mean 'love the ones you're with'. In response to this human failure to carry Jesus' true image and coherent message into new eras and cultures, fresh visions of the Son of Man have begun to arise that have even begun to resemble the Daughter of the Goddess.

What would it have been like to talk to Jesus, the son of God? What question would he ask you while looking deeply into your eyes that would invite you to consider your life so differently, so radically, that the evolution of your unity consciousness levelled up? Over my time at seminary I have come to a deep appreciation for history's gurus, prophets, goddesses, and messiahs (I have not lost my polytheistic outlook, alas). I feel this way because I can locate a yearning in me for knowing and being known, profoundly. I feel this way because I believe that on this earth have walked holy beings, and in their light we can grow into places in ourselves perhaps otherwise unreachable in a human lifetime. I feel this way because I can see and feel in myself the pull of my painful past, my physical discomforts, and my daily irritants that are the static on the line between me and my limited understanding of God|dess. I cannot say who Jesus is, I can only say what the making of him tells me about us; we want to be loved and we want to know God. In that we are in total accord.

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